

The Troubled Relationship of Friendship, Fraternity and Democracy: Derrida's Thoughts on the Platonic Question of Political Existence in the *Politics of Friendship**

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| Abstract |

This article examines the questionable basis of political existence revealed in Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*, focusing on his interpretation of the Platonic dialogues. I argue that Derrida's interpretive thinking shows a problematic ground of being with others inherent in the classical questioning of political friendship and democratic fraternity. Scholars have grappled with Derrida's complicated interpretation of political friendship, which deals with an ambiguous relationship of friendship, fraternity and democracy. Their understanding of Derrida's thoughts on friendship mostly focuses on his deconstructive conception of *différance* rather than his serious approach to the classical question of being. But a close reading of the *Politics of Friendship* shows that Derrida's thinking of friendship and fraternity intends to reveal above all the ambiguous nature of human existence still revealed in ancient philosophical thoughts. Especially, his interpretation of the Platonic dialogues tackles the problematic ground of democratic existence that cannot be separated from a customary doctrine of the natural brotherhood. For Derrida, the classical thinking of being signifies not merely a metaphysical approach to sameness but the questionable coexistence of sameness and otherness. Therefore, I suggest that it is important to grasp how Derrida's critical thinking of political friendship approaches the ambiguous implications of being contained in Plato's original thinking of friendship, fraternity and democracy.

Keywords | : Political Existence; Being; Other; Fraternity; Friendship; Democracy

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I. Introduction

This article examines the questionable basis of political existence revealed in Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*, focusing on his interpretation of the Platonic dialogues (Derrida 2005a, Hereafter PF).¹⁾ I argue that Derrida's interpretive thinking shows a limited ground of political existence inherent in the classical questioning of political friendship and democratic fraternity. In Derrida's view, the humanitarian implication of political friendship has been questionable from the beginning of the French Revolution (PF, 265). The democratic citizens of the Revolutionary France were not presumed simply as free and equal individuals; they were primarily seen as brothers sharing political values and mutual affection for each other *within* a certain boundary of the nation state (Keitner 2007, 74–75; Safran 1991, 220).²⁾ Today, we confront a democratic crisis with far-right movements related to racism, chauvinism and other exclusive forms of social doctrines (Benhabib 2004; Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2005). Derrida sees that these political phenomena display a questionable mixture of democracy and brotherhood; the universal ideal of democratic brotherhood cannot be separated from the conventional belief in natural citizenship connected to a certain land or territory (PF, 272; cf. Benhabib 2004, 215; Safran 1991, 84). Derrida's philosophical approach is important in that it makes us reflect upon a deeper existential basis of the contemporary democratic crisis that excludes refugees, immigrants and other types of foreigners from political

1) Derrida (2005a), which was originally published in French as *Politiques de l'amitié* (Paris: Galiléé, 1994).

2) Derrida points out that Victor Hugo praises for the magnificence of the French revolution in terms of the manly virtue of the brotherhood which does not include the "universal class hospitable to women or sisters" (PF, 265).

communities. For him, the nature of these phenomena is not simply originated from an illiberal trend of the contemporary politics; rather, the recurring problem of anti-immigrant movements implies a fundamental question of human existence that constantly needs the friendly mode of living with others within a certain boundary of political community (PF, 273).

Scholars have grappled with Derrida's complicated interpretation of political friendship, which deals with a questionable relationship of friendship, fraternity and democracy. But their understanding of Derrida's thoughts on friendship mostly focus on his deconstructive conception of *différance* rather than his serious approach to the classical question of being (Dallmayr 1999; Goh 2011; Ludwig 2010; Reynolds 2010). Other studies in the Derrida's view of friendship simply attempt to analyze his critical pedagogy or the practical aspects of his philosophical criticism (Sokoloff 2005; Waghid 2008; Zembylas 2015). However, Derrida's questioning of the conventional belief in friendship and fraternity allows us to reconsider the ambiguous ground of human existence still revealed in ancient philosophical thoughts (Caputo 1999; Thomson 2005; cf. Derrida 1984, 23; Derrida 2005b, 47–48). Since Derrida's philosophical approach to the politics of friendship is based on his own view of the classical philosophy, it is helpful for us to examine his understanding of Plato's political thoughts. Especially, his interpretation of the Platonic dialogues tackles the problematic nature of political existence that cannot be separated from a customary doctrine of the natural brotherhood.³⁾ For Derrida, classical thinking

3) Throughout the whole paper, I will often use the terms like “problematic,” “questionable,” and “ambiguous” because a basic intention of the Platonic philosophy is not to provide apparent solutions to the political problems but to make readers think about permanent questions of them (Strauss 1978, 50–57). This is why Plato writes dialogues rather than treatises. I think that Derrida also knows Plato's philosophical intention to reveal these

of nature (*physis*) signifies not merely as a theoretical object of metaphysical approach but the questionable origin of being as “what appears in birth... nurturing and growing” (PF, viii; cf. Heidegger 2000, 15). The natural possibility of living with others requires human beings to seek a friendly community of peaceful coexistence based on mutual affection.⁴⁾

In this essay, I suggest that Derrida’s critical thinking of political friendship reveals an inevitable question of being contained in Plato’s original thinking of friendship, fraternity and democracy. Accordingly, the second section explicates the problematic ground of being with others in Derrida’s radical thoughts on the classical question of friendship. In the third section, I analyze Derrida’s critique of Carl Schmitt’s political thoughts on the friend/enemy distinction based on a partial interpretation of the Platonic text. Then, the fourth and fifth sections show how Derrida’s interpretive thinking discloses Plato’s complicated approach to the political friendship in the *Menexenus* which contains classical problems of the natural brotherhood and democratic existence. In the sixth section, I will explicate how Derrida’s approach to political existence necessarily leads to the open question of friendship revealed in Plato’s *Lysis*. In conclusion, I maintain

political questions as an ambiguous ground of human existence. Here, the term “ambiguous” means not a negative sense of vagueness but a challenging character of the politico-philosophical problems and questions. These terms are also related to necessary tension inherent in the oppositional conceptions like the public/private, nobility/equality or enmity/homogeneity used in this paper; these seemingly contrasted concepts must be understood not simply as logical oppositions but starting points to think about the necessary connectedness of the opposing movements of political existence.

4) According to Derrida, the affectionate relationship of the domestic brotherhood has been usually connected to the traditional authority of father. Thus, democratic fraternity which seeks mutual affection of citizens as brothers often signifies the paradoxical condition of patriarchy (cf. PF, ix).

that Derrida's classical questioning of friendship reveals a permanent problem of the democratic citizenship based on a determinate boundary of being with others.

II. Derrida's Disquietude about the Humanitarian Brotherhood and the Classical Problem of Friendship

Human beings can learn the best-possible mode of living with others only in ceaseless striving for the possibility of friendship. The constant longing for friendship enables human beings to engage in various modes of being with others (PF, 15). For Derrida, the shared ground of friendship cannot be detached from a broader context of political community (PF, 296–297). The human desire to connect with others is not simply directed toward a universal community of all human beings; rather, the natural need of a friendly community often invokes fraternity based on a particular moral conception of political association. Caputo argues that for Derrida, the ongoing problem of political fraternization is connected to the contemporary conception of humanity based on a universal friendship of human beings (Caputo 1999, 188–189). Derrida's critical thinking confronts the fact that the humanitarian call to friendship and brotherhood of all humans often tends to be framed by a limited scheme of coexistence such as ethnicity or nationality (PF, 298–299, 304–305; cf. Derrida 2005b, 58; Keitner 2007, 84).

The ancient thinking of friendship already discloses this fundamental problem of political existence. According to Derrida, the questionable ground of the classical friendship (*philia*) reveals an enigmatic character of living with others, allowing us to reconsider the fundamental problem of friendship (PF, 299). For

him, Aristotle's paradoxical remarks on friendship, "Oh my friends, there is no friend," indicates that the ancient doctrine of friendship already puts itself into question from the beginning (PF, 301; Laertius 1959, bk. 5, sec. 21).⁵⁾ This contradictory saying of ancient philosophy intends to disclose both the being and non-being of friendship at the same time.⁶⁾ The classical thinking of friendship is still significant not for showing moral solutions to the contemporary problems of war and hostility but for seeking a careful approach to the inevitable basis of being in the *polis* (Aristotle 1934 [hereafter NE], 1169b 10 f.). Thus, Derrida argues that a mere reception of accustomed interpretations of the Greek friendship easily makes us reject the ongoing philosophical questions of political friendship (PF, 300).

In this light, Derrida points out questionable aspects of the humanitarian argument for the universal friendship and its critique of the racist doctrine. For example, Maurice Blanchot suggests that the political experience of Judaism reveals not simply historical events of a certain religious people but a moral foundation of universal friendship: a genuine historical lesson of the Nazi

5) The original Greek text is "ὦ [ὦ] φίλοι, οὐδέ τις φίλος (ὦ [ὦ]i philoi, oudeis philos)". This sentence is often translated as "he who has many friends can have no true friend". But Derrida points out that there is another way of translation according to the ambiguous textual history of the first two words "ὦ [ὦ] φίλοι": they can be read either as a vocative interjection (ὦ [ὦ] philoi; Oh friends!) or a phrase with a relative pronoun (ὦ[ὦ] philoi: The one who has many friends) (PF, 189).

6) Derrida's approach to the Greek question of friendship ultimately leads to a deeper problem of Platonic questioning, from which Aristotle develops his own question about the possibility and limit of friendship. Thus, Derrida's interpretive thinking attempts to disclose a questionable basis of Aristotle's recurrent struggle with Plato's thinking, rather than simply criticizing metaphysical aspects of Platonism. From Plato's original mode of philosophizing, therefore, we can find a great resource of thinking about the ambiguous nature of friendship and its political implications.

persecution is that the Jews are our brother (PF, 304; Blanchot 1988).⁷) But what do the terms “we”, “brother” and “friendship” mean in this philanthropic mode of thinking? Derrida confesses his own disquietude with the literary assertions of the universal brotherhood for the Jewish people (PF, 305; Caputo 1999, 185; cf. Fathaigh 2024, 502). Derrida’s criticism is generated not merely from their failure to explicate the problematic combination of friendship and brotherhood. Rather, his uneasiness implies a broader dissatisfaction with the ambiguous ground of humanism; its naïve vision of fraternity often covers up the recurring problem of political existence (PF, 305; Caputo 1999, 186). The humanitarian belief in universal brotherhood cannot easily detach itself from a finite ground of political friendship, as seen in the Victor Hugo’s paradoxical praise of both the French exceptionalism and universal fraternity (PF, 264; cf. Fathaigh 2024, 500).⁸) In this sense, Derrida invites us to examine Carl Schmitt’s influential doctrine of political existence based on the friend/enemy distinction.

III. Schmitt’s Conception of Political Existence and the Forgotten Question of Friendship

For Derrida, ordinary criticism of Schmitt’s view about the political often fails

7) Derrida cites this sentence from Blanchot’s “A Letter to Salomon Malka,” *L’Arche*, n. 373 (May. 1988). For a good study of Derrida’s criticism of Blanchot, see Fathaigh (2024).

8) Derrida points out that Hugo proclaims France as an “*extraordinary nation*” which will show a universal ground of democratic civilization. For Hugo, the French Revolution aims at the genuine fraternity of all nations beyond the individual rights of freedom and equality; the French republic must be “a family” symbolizing a national community that seeks humanity as such (Hugo 1867; cf. Spicker 2006, 119).

to approach genuine problems of his existential thoughts, merely focusing on his radical view of the public enemy (PF, 152; Schmitt 2007, 28). A proper way of the critique must deal with a hidden meaning of friendship to be disclosed from Schmitt's deeper views of political existence (cf. Caputo 1999, 194). In Derrida's view, Schmitt's conception of the enemy cannot be detached from his methodological strategy to illuminate the necessary differentiation of beings; Schmitt as a legal scholar emphasizes the phenomenon of hostility because it provides a solid logical basis for his juristic framework of opposition and negation (PF, 152; cf. Schmitt 2007, 20–21). But Derrida's thinking further suggests that Schmitt's emphasis on the public enemy is grounded in his own determination of being in terms of the differing movements of beings (cf. PF, 153; Schmitt 2007, 27).

The genuine understanding of being cannot be captured by the juristic or logical determinations of beings in speech.⁹⁾ Schmitt's thinking of the political certainly recognizes a fundamental limit of the rational categorization of human existence (Schmitt 2007, 49; cf. Mouffe 2005, 11–17).¹⁰⁾ In his approach to the political, however, Schmitt does not examine other possibilities of being exterior to his own scheme of the friend/enemy distinction. Derrida maintains that

9) In this sense, Derrida refers to Heidegger's approach to the questionable implication of being as such because it tries to disclose a more primordial ground of speech or language (*Sprache*) in terms of a classical conception of the *logos* (PF, 244; cf. Heidegger 2000, 130–31). In Derrida's view, however, Schmitt's approach to the political existence does not question his own presumption of being while trying to overcome the metaphysical de-politicization of human existence in modern liberalism (PF, 247; cf. Schmitt 2007, 69–72).

10) Schmitt says that “[i]f there really are enemies in the ontological sense...[in other words,] as long as a people exists in the political sphere, this people must...determine by itself the distinction of friend and enemy.”

although Schmitt intends to reveal the existential ground of a primordial opposition (*polemos*) among beings, he does not investigate a more original question of being that sustains the oppositional relationship of beings (PF, 249). Thereby, Schmitt's thoughts on the political are unable to disclose a necessary question about the common ground of friendship concealed in the conflictual movements of being in the *polis*.

For Schmitt, political relationship of human beings implies public hostility rather than private enmity. The nature of the political signifies a shared experience of the friend-enemy grouping without any personal sentiments of hatred (Schmitt 2007, 28–29 [n. 9]; PF, 87). Therefore, he sees that the political possibility of war between states must be separated from factious antagonism of human beings; political communities can be enemies to each other while there is a friendship within each political community. Schmitt seems to presume that the political community always offers a persistent basis of friendship among its own citizens. In contrast to Schmitt's presumptive argument, however, Derrida tries to investigate a necessary connection between the private and the public: one's own friend in a private life can be a public enemy, and the enemy in a public sense can be a personal friend (Thomson 2005, 155).

In the varying interactions of everyday life, the absolute categorization of the private and public is not possible. Moreover, it is always difficult for citizens to set a clear borderline between themselves and others in the actual maintenance of a political regime. When the existing boundary of the state is open to foreigners, the public scheme of the friend/enemy grouping is often shaken by unpredictable movements of people such as migrants, immigrants and refugees (cf. Benhabib, 2004, 124; Honig 2000, 78–79). Derrida asserts that Schmitt as a legal theorist of the European tradition cannot but struggle against

this disputable margin of the jurisprudential framework of political existence (PF, 88). For Schmitt, it is necessary to protect the logical purity of his legal standpoint from the existential necessity of the friend/enemy confusion.¹¹⁾

In this light, Derrida examines Schmitt's understanding of the Socratic distinction between war (*polemos*) and faction (*stasis*) revealed in Plato's *Republic* (bk. 5, 470a f.). Here, Socrates mentions that the possibility of war (*polemos*) emerges between Greeks and barbarians; the citizens of the Greek states are friends by nature while the barbarians outside the Greek civilization are enemies of the Greek political regimes as a whole. Interpreting this context of the Socratic discourse, Schmitt argues that for Plato, the wars among the Greeks themselves must be defined as factious struggles (*Kämpfe*) based on the personal hatred (Schmitt 2007, 29 [n.9]). Schmitt's interpretation assumes that Plato's philosophical doctrine already shows the radical distinction between the public hostility (*polemios*) and the personal hatred (*ekhthros*). In the relevant part of the dialogue, however, Socrates also mentions that both the public war against barbarians and the private conflict among the Greeks are generated from the natural disposition of hatred (*ekhthros*) among human beings (*Republic* [Plato 1991], 470b). Thus, Derrida points out that the dialogic context of the *Republic* (bk. 5), which Schmitt cites in a partial sense, do not simply present the deterministic framework of the hostility (*polemios*) / hatred (*ekhthros*) distinction (PF, 90; cf. Thomson 2005, 155). Without seeking a more detailed analysis of the Platonic dialogue, Schmitt supposes Socrates' momentary discussion of the war and faction as a real view of Plato (Schmitt 2007, 29 [n. 9]).¹²⁾

11) "The enemy is solely the public enemy [nur der öffentliche Feind], because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men, particularly to a whole nation, becomes public by virtue of such a relationship. The enemy is *hostis*, not *inimicus* in the broader sense; *polemios*, not *ekhthros*" (Schmitt 2007, 28 [n. 9]).

Derrida recognizes that although Schmitt's theoretical approach is juridical, his ontological mode of thinking at least attempts to disclose a significant ground of the legal conceptions (PF, 153). The political power of the state *is* to maintain legality as such; thinking of the political should reveal the original basis of the juridical. Thus, Schmitt maintains that simple criticisms against his own conception of the public enemy and hostility cannot understand the deeper existential basis of his juristic conception (Schmitt 2007, 21–22). For Derrida, however, Schmitt's ontological approach fails to deal with the ancient question of being in the *polis*. In contrast to Schmitt's view, Socrates' own discussion shows that factious enmity among the Greeks also constitutes an inevitable problem of the *political* existence: the discordance of human beings within and without a political community can always occur as an illness of the human body does (*Republic*, 471b–c). Moreover, ongoing discussions between Socrates and Glaucon in the dramatic context indicate that Schmitt's own distinction of the hostile (*polemios*) and hateful (*echthros*) covers up Plato's original questioning about the problematic nature (*phusis*) of political friendship (*Republic*, 470d). The constant emergence of war and faction is interconnected with a shared ground of friendship that makes a great vision of the Greek civilization possible.

12) For Caputo, Derrida's critique of Schmitt contains a twofold insight into the possibility and limit of the political. On one hand, Derrida sees the necessity of the political relying upon the "logic of fraternization" that seeks a homogeneous way of life; on the other hand, he tries to show the open possibility of "something beyond" the political (Caputo 1999, 194). In this light, Caputo argues that Derrida suggests his own vision of politics in order to overcome the political violence of sameness (Caputo 1999, 195). However, Derrida's philosophical intention is not to present his own politics but to disclose the irremovable problem of political existence. Derrida's interpretive thinking attempts to disclose a deeper conception of being inherent in Schmitt's approach to the political. A metaphysical perspective of being can be found in Schmitt's interpretation of the Platonic approach to the friend/enemy distinction.

The Greek people as a whole (*Hellenikon genos*) might be recognized as the human beings sharing a familial kinship or brotherhood which naturally differentiates themselves from others (*Republic*, 470c). But these remarks of the Socratic discussion cannot be read as a final view of Plato's philosophical approach to political friendship. Behind the necessary differentiation between the self and the other lurks the inevitable movement of human disposition expressing a feeling of dislike for someone or something; the ambiguous ground of being with others constantly shows itself through the recurring sentiments of hatred among the differing human beings whether it is toward the fellow citizens or foreigners (*Republic*, 470c). Plato's thinking of the political existence reveals that the natural problem of personal animosity constantly affects the public discourse on the otherness of the foreigners. Thus, Derrida maintains Schmitt fails to confront a political question of the racial or national dispositions because they are already obscured in his legalistic scheme of hostility and friendship (PF, 91).

The dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon indicates that the political questioning is not to display a clear distinction between public hostility and private enmity but to strive for the best-possible mode of coexistence (*Republic*, 472a ff.). Lemoine (2020) argues that in the *Republic*, the friend-enemy distinction is basically questionable in both private and public senses. For Lemoine, the Socratic discourse shows that human beings are often unable to determine true friends and enemies in their everyday life of the *polis*; in a discordant political regime, violent factions always tend to harm innocent fellow citizens simply to dominate their own regime and others (*Republic*, 335e, 373b f.; Lemoine 2020, 104). Socrates says that the factious enmity is a widespread disease of the Greek people who might be natural friends (*phusei philous einai*) (*Republic*, 470d). But Socrates' discussion of the natural community and its

pathology further raises a significant question about a deeper ground of political friendship: Who *is* a true friend in the political sense? This Socratic questioning leads to Derrida's discussion of Plato's *Menexenus* which contains fundamental problems of political friendship.

IV. Plato's *Menexenus* and the Ambiguous Ground of Political Friendship

Plato's *Menexenus* is full of the commonplace patriotic eulogy for Athens as a leader of the Greek civilization. But this Platonic dialogue starts from Socrates' sarcastic remarks about great rhetorical skills of democratic orators. In the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates introduces the original speech of Aspasia (Pericles' foreign mistress) who might be a true author of Pericles' renowned funeral oration praising the Athenian democracy and the Greek civilization (*Menexenus* [Plato 1929], 236b). For Derrida, this dramatic character of "fiction-in-a-fiction" implies Plato's subtle design of the *Menexenus* as a dialogue of the Socratic irony (PF, 92 f.). For Lemoine, it is important to illuminate the dramatic context of the *Menexenus* portraying Socrates' recitation of the foreigner's speech that hails racial supremacy of Athenian citizens. Lemoine maintains that as Socrates mentions Aspasia as the true speech writer, the readers must think about a "gadfly-like effect" of the foreign mistress' speech and Socratic irony of the imitative political rhetoric (Lemoine 2020, 134).

These literary aspects require us to carefully reflect upon Socrates' philosophical intention to reproduce Aspasia's discourse and its rhetoric. Derrida maintains that one of the most significant problems of Aspasia's speech is its

hasty argument for homogeneity of the Greek people based on their common kinship (*suggeneia*) (PF, 92; *Menexenus*, 244a). For Aspasia, the natural affinity stemming from birth is a firm ground of the Greek friendship which forms and sustains their political communities. But Derrida suggests that the sarcastic mood of Socrates at the beginning of the dialogue allows us to question whether Aspasia's rhetoric for the genealogical tie of political friendship shows a truth of political existence or a phantasm of the Greek tradition (PF, 92). The dramatic context of the *Menexenus* already problematizes the political friendship based on ethnicity or nativism, which constitutes a customary belief in the natural superiority of the Athenian people (237a f.).

The Greek nation as a whole can achieve a great community of friendship only by overcoming a widespread factional strife (*stasis*) among themselves. Thus, Aspasia argues that the Greek factions are not originated from their natural hatred but from historical misfortune (*dustuchia*) (244b). In Aspasia's accustomed view, this factious struggle among the Greek people displays temporal illness of political existence harming their own virtue and friendship. Without questioning the possibility and limit of political friendship, she simply asserts that the Greek people are friends because they belong to the same living stock; this ethnic root enables them to share a common way of life and forgive the historical violence perpetrated against each other (244b). Thereby, Aspasia's discourse betrays an unquestioned faith in their "nobility of birth (*eugeneia*)", i.e. a conventional scheme of Greek racism (237b). This racial belief of Aspasia can be traced back to the Greek myth of autochthony that deifies a native community of people born in the same land (cf. Thomson 2005, 20). Here, Derrida's interpretive thinking confronts a problematic confusion of natural brotherhood and political equality. The mythical doctrine of autochthony can be

easily mixed up with a democratic perspective of fellow citizens seeking equality of birth (*isogonia*); at the same time, the shared belief in equal birth leads to a political demand for the legal equality of the Athenian people (*isonomia*) (PF, 93; *Menexenus*, 239a).

Furthermore, Aspasia's funeral speech simply attempts to praise the Athenian polity based on a paradoxical combination of nature (*phusis*) and custom (*nomos*). Her rhetoric of political friendship displays a historical celebration of the forefathers who died for the Athenian brothers in the battle. For Derrida, Aspasia's speech (*logos*) fancifully describes the deceased ancestors as a living power that enables the descendants to keep their own way of life as a virtuous one (PF, 94). Aspasia asserts that the Athenian forefathers were not strangers from the outside but the 'offspring of the soil' (237c); political existence of the Athenians has been rooted in their own land from the beginning of history. In this sense, their noble tradition has grown from a natural ground of the soil and blood, which can continually secure their own modes of coexistence based on good birth (*eugenia*) (236e; 237b). Thereby, Aspasia's fictional logic of the homogenous community betrays a political difficulty that must combine two conflicting values, i.e. aristocratic virtue of historical tradition and democratic equality of natural brotherhood: "the one principle of selection is this: the man that is deemed to be wise or good rules and governs. And the cause of this our polity lies in our equality of birth" (238e). But Aspasia's rhetoric covers up the politico-philosophical question of how to harmonize the possible conflict between the aristocratic hierarchy and democratic egalitarianism in everyday life; it merely tries to display a firm belief in the natural superiority and fraternity of the Athenian people decorated with the fanciful history of their ancestors' virtue and nobility.

Appropriating the mythical belief in the Athenian predecessors, Aspasia's rhetoric attempts to transform history into a natural condition of their own freedom, equality and brotherhood. This fantastic doctrine of political friendship does not allow the fellow citizens to think about the limited ground of their own being concealed from the alleged racial superiority. Particularly, their democratic faith in the noble brotherhood makes them overlook the open possibility of welcoming others as new members of their own community. In this light, Derrida sees that Aspasia's discourse already falls in a forgetfulness of the genuine possibility of being with others; Socrates' satirical imitation of Aspasia's speech intends to reveal how the popular rhetoric of democratic fraternity prevents citizens from questioning the manipulative aspect of the conventional eulogy for their own citizenship (PF, 100). Aspasia merely declares that the noble nature of the Athenian people has existed from the beginning, allowing them to fight for freedom against the enemies within and without the Greek communities (239b).

But Aspasia's speech does not explicate a questionable origin of the factional conflicts among the Greeks and how to handle the civil war (*stasis*). While simply enumerating the historical records of the Greeks' war against others, Aspasia's oration does not allow her audiences to reflect upon the recurrent possibility of the war among the Greek brethren and fellow citizens. Before delivering the Aspasia's speech, Socrates remarks about the fancy rhetoric of the funeral oration which simply aims at affecting the public minds to praise their political affairs instantly (235d). Kasimis (2016) argues that careful interpretation of the Platonic dialogue discloses a philosophical into political secrets concealed in the historical reality of a polity. Particularly, the Socratic discourse of Athenian autochthony indicates not simply the necessary impact of

a “biological fact” but a “fictional ideal” of how to control civic life in the Athenian situation (Kasimis 2016, 352). In this light, Derrida maintains that while carefully displaying the seeming eloquence of the Aspasia’s speech, Socrates denounces her rhetorical skill that merely intends to flatter the widespread expectations of the democratic multitude (PF, 102; *Menexenus*, 236b).¹³ Disclosing the classical problem of political friendship, Derrida’s interpretive thinking lets us reconsider Plato’s complicated approach to the questionable ground of being in the *polis*.

In light of the dramatic context of the *Menexenus*, it is hard to follow Schmitt’s view of the classical distinction between the public enemy and the private one as a political doctrine of Plato. Rather, the Socratic discussions of war (*polemos*) and faction (*stasis*) subtly disclose an ambiguous ground of the political friendship, which contains a paradoxical combination of nature (*phusis*) and law (*nomos*) (cf. Strauss 1978, 117). For Derrida, profoundly inscribed in the ancient political belief is the collective sentiment of friendship as brotherhood, rather than ontological determination of the public enemy; the customary belief in the natural brotherhood is still contained in the contemporary doctrines of democracy, “where a tradition thus tends of itself to break with itself” (PF, 103; cf. Derrida 2005, 38). In this light, we need to reconsider the classical ground of modern democracies that proclaim universal ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity.

13) Here, Derrida confesses that his “deconstructionist” approach still belongs to a certain classical heritage of the Platonic irony (PF, 102).

V. The Classical Problem of Democratic Citizenship and Political Existence

In the *Menexenus*, Aspasia's political rhetoric depends on the questionable historical tradition, simply trying to establish the Athenian people as the best nation sharing natural equality of noble birth (238e). Her fanciful claim of the national superiority and kinship is deeply connected to the democratic striving for civic equality before the law; the actualization of noble democracy needs a mythical doctrine of political friendship as an ideological basis of being in the *polis* (Thomson 2005, 19).¹⁴ For Derrida, the modern conception of democratic citizenship conceals this classical problem of natural fraternity while constantly arguing for universal ideal of human rights for all nations (PF, 99). The popular attachment to their own community involves personal sentiments of cherishing their own way of life and defending it against foreigners (Benhabib 2004, 46). Schmitt's view of the political misses a crucial dimension of the democratic reality: a democratic people and their leadership cannot easily distinguish public enmity from private hatred (cf. Honig 2001, 81, 91). Popular enthusiasm for democratic friendship makes it difficult to differentiate the private hatred against others from public hostility. In Derrida's view, no concept of the political including democracy 'has ever broken with the heritage of this

14) Thomson (2005) argues that Derrida's discussion of political friendship uncovers the questionable ambiguity inherent in the contemporary conception of friendship. The open possibility of universal friendship clashes with the "logic of fraternization" based on the necessity of preferring one's own friends to others and designating them as brothers (Thomson 2005, 16). According to Thomson, Derrida's interpretive thinking intends not to emphasize the impossibility of friendship but to reveal the ongoing question of fraternization that is "always already at work within friendship" (Thomson 2005, 17).

troubling necessity' (PF, 100; cf. Derrida 2005, 39).

There are always passionate movements of the democratic appeal to fraternity of a native community (Derrida 2005, 61; cf. Benhabib 2004, 206). As long as the fellow citizens of democracy remain faithful to living memories of forefathers and mythical traditions of noble birth, their general claims for freedom and equality are limited to a determinate boundary of their own way of life. In the *Menexenus*, Aspasia's praise of the Athenian regime reveals a problematic ambiguity wavering between aristocratic passion for the rule of the best and democratic conviction of civic equality. According to her, although Athens is the same polity from the beginning, "one man calls it 'democracy,' another man...gives it some other name; but it is, in very truth, an 'aristocracy' backed by popular approbation" (238d). Aspasia's discourse suggests that the genuine power of democracy is generated from the virtuous rule of the wise men approved and elected by the multitude. Here, Derrida sees the problematic authority of democratic majority trying to control "the most part of civic affairs" while depending on the aristocratic selection of ruling offices (PF, 101; cf. Derrida 2005, 33–34). The democratic power of the multitude *is* already and always in tension with the aristocratic rule of the best men. Aspasia's discourse attempts to resolve this ongoing tension of the Athenian polity by arguing for the natural equality of birth applying to the whole citizens as brothers (239a f.).¹⁵⁾

For Derrida, Aspasia's hesitation to define the Athenian polity as democracy

15) Loraux (2000) argues that the myth of autochthony constitutes a core political ideology of the Athenian democracy. According to her, the myth provides the Athenian people with a democratic identity while educating them as natural guardians of the fatherland with strong patriotic feelings (Loraux 2000, 34). From this mythical ground of the Athenian regime, Derrida's thinking discloses a questionable aspect of democratic coexistence.

reveals an inevitable difficulty to uphold a noble regime with the political consent of the many (PF, 101). Although the possibility of a virtuous community must be based on the friendly relationship of fellow citizens, it is hard to achieve the mutual affection of the citizens as a whole. Thus, Derrida sees that the political influence of the majority tends to make the aristocratic rule depend on a populist doctrine of equal birth (*isogeny*) combined with the egalitarian claim to legal equality (*isonomy*) (PF, 103). The equivocal mixture of aristo-democratic conceptions revealed in the *Menexenus* illuminates Plato's classical insight into the enduring problem of democracy. While contemporary democratic regimes attempt to set an ideal of universal human rights, the actual operation of democracy tends to retain the mythical doctrines of native community as a reliable basis of civic friendship (Benhabib 2004, 44, 216). The democratic way of life is still rooted in the fabricated beliefs in the noble nature of a democratic people superior to other nations, constantly invoking the question of the autochthony (cf. Loraux 2006, 194).

Derrida's understanding of the ancient problem of democracy allows us to review a limited framework of the Schmitt's modern conception of the political. Without rigorously investigating the permanent question of political friendship, his conception of the political based on the public enemy can be easily entrapped to an exclusive doctrine of fraternity and hatred against others. The humanitarian ideal of democratic brotherhood often conceals a mutual affection toward one's own people as familial beings within a political community. In terms of the Schmitt's thinking of the political, however, these phenomena of the friendly sentiments do not form a pure meaning of the political existence. For Schmitt, the political way of being with others must be grounded in the constant possibility of war against the public enemy. But in everyday life, the

possibility of the friend/enemy grouping cannot separate itself from the popular dispositions which involve both individuals' affection for one's own people and their personal hatred of strangers. In contrast to Schmitt's view, this emotional and private temperament of the fraternity and enmity must be considered as an existential ground of the political.

The daily attitude and opinion of a people against the political enemy is often generated from customary moods of their own friendship rooted in a communal way of life (cf. Honig 2001, 79; Thomson 2005, 18–19). Derrida's interpretive thinking indicates that only when tackling these broader questions of political friendship, we can search for new possibilities of democracy and the political (PF, 104).¹⁶ The philosophical approach to political existence must confront a questionable basis of the shared modes of everyday life. The actual creation and maintenance of a political regime require popular admiration for its homogeneous way of life based on a familial membership rather than sovereign decision of the public enemy. But popular discourses of the political friendship are always and already exposed to the philosophical questioning about a true ground of human coexistence. For Derrida, therefore, his deconstructive approach to the dominant and exclusive faiths in the democratic community is not simply to demolish the national confidence of fraternity but to think about the recurrent *problem* of the political need of friendship (PF, 105). The critical attitude of philosophical questioning must challenge the historical ideals of democracy, trying to uncover open possibilities of democracy concealed from the alleged homogeneity of democratic regimes.

The genuine understanding of the political seeks to understand the possibility

16) Derrida's interpretive thinking also reveals a recurring difficulty of the so-called "deconstructive" approach to an open possibility of "democracy to come" (PF, 104).

and limit of being with others, in which a certain group of human beings constantly differentiate themselves from others. For Derrida, the inevitable aspect of *différance* (differing and deferring) of the political friendship signifies a primordial movement of otherness (heterogeneity) prior to the linguistic or legalistic framing of the communal identity (homogeneity) (Derrida 2005, 38, 48–49; cf. Thomson 2005, 24–25). In his view, the authentic possibility of democracy can be revealed only when human beings recognize the underlying force of *différance* producing the *other* possibilities of democracy, i.e. “democracy to come” (Derrida 2005b, 8, 38–39; cf. Caputo 1999, 186, 191). In this light, we can see how Plato’s political philosophy still keeps lively resources of critical thinking about the questionable ground of democratic friendship. As seen above, Socrates’ ironical description of the Aspasia’s contradictory speech allows us to see the limited boundary of democratic equality and fraternity (PF, 105). The paradoxical movement of democracy vibrating between the closedness and openness of political existence signifies an inevitable problem of being with others. For Derrida, the Platonic dialogue reveals how the necessary tension of democratic friendship generates a self-overcoming power of human thinking which can go beyond a public determination of the friend/enemy grouping (PF, 106). In this light, the ambiguous nature of political friendship leads to a deeper philosophical question of friendship as such, i.e., who the genuine friend is.

VI. Plato’s *Lysis* and the Open Question of Friendship

The meaning of friendship is one of the most important themes of classical political philosophy. For Aristotle, friendship (*philia*) is a core ground of justice

that supports the best-possible regime (NE, 1155a 25). But what is friendship as such? Is it possible to define the truth of friendship? Derrida's critical thinking of this problem starts from Diogenes Laertius' report of Aristotle's enigmatic remarks on friendship: "Oh friends, there is no friend" (PF, vii; Laertius 1959, bk. 5, sec. 21). Dallmayr argues that Derrida's interpretation of the classical friendship is based on his critical view of ancient philosophy as a limited mode of thinking that reduces the other to sameness (Dallmayr 1999, 119).¹⁷ But Derrida's interpretive thinking intends to reveal a classical insight into the ambiguous situation of the human striving for friendship without knowing the truth of it (PF, ix; Derrida 2016, 24). Derrida maintains that Aristotle's enigmatic saying about friendship keeps a dialectical questioning of Plato's *Lysis* (PF, 6). This Platonic dialogue provides a permanent question about the nature of friendship, showing varying possibilities of approaching the being of friend. Derrida sees that the equivocal modes of Plato's philosophical questioning signify the necessary difficulty of knowing *who* the genuine friend *is* (PF, 6). In this light, the Platonic approach to friendship gives us a challenging opportunity to think about the problematic ground of being with others.

Derrida's interpretive thinking intends to reveal from the Platonic philosophy an open question of friendship beyond the modern distinction between the public and private. According to Derrida, the beginning of the *Lysis* contains a dramatic scene in which Socrates asks a shy youth (Hippothales) the identity of his loved

17) Similar to Dallmayr's criticism, Ludwig (2010) argues Derrida's view of the *Lysis* illuminates only a partial dimension of the Platonic dialogue. According to him, Derrida's thinking approaches the ancient philosophy of friendship in terms of the limited framework of otherness, removing the deeper meaning of sameness from friendship as such (Ludwig 2010, 144).

one (*Lysis* [Plato 1925], 204b f.). But Hippothales does not want to reveal his own secret to Socrates. For Derrida, this dramatic context of the *Lysis* shows that the truth of friendship is hard to be publicized (PF, 85). It reminds us that for Schmitt, the real sense of the political is based on the public conception of the friend/enemy distinction. But the public and private characters of friendship and hostility cannot be articulated in a distinctive way; human beings cannot determine who the enemy is without identifying who the friend is (cf. PF, 153). For Plato, therefore, the ambiguous nature of friendship reveals itself not as an object of public decision but as a recurrent question about the being of one's own.

In the beginning of the *Lysis*, Socrates' careful discussion about the truth of friendship starts from Ctesippus' disclosure of the name of "Lysis" as the loved friend of Hippothales (204d). The genuine approach to friendship is made possible by a cautious attempt to recognize one's own friends and to speak with them, rather than by a proclamation of the friend/enemy grouping. Socrates mentions that human beings tend to have a "desire (*epithumia*)" for friendship when they need help from others (*Lysis*, 220 c). The natural emergence of the longing for friendship implies the limit and deficiency of human existence; the possibility of friendship is originated not simply from the self-interests of human beings but from the naturally "deprived state (*endeos*)" of being in the world (221e). The restricted conditions of human existence constantly reproduce the mood or disposition of uneasiness in everyday life (cf. Heidegger 1962, 172–173, 228 f.). For Derrida, this primordial experience of shortage and anxiety makes human beings attracted to what is immediately suitable or familiar (*oikeios*) to them; human beings tend to seek a friendly basis of being with others within limits (PF, 154; cf. Sokoloff, 2005, 349–350). In this light, it is

notable that at the end of the dialogue, Socrates discusses the question of belongingness (*oikeiotēs*; suitability or familiarity) as a possible bond of friendship (*Lysis*, 222a f.). Derrida points out that the Socratic discourse of natural kinship or familiarity reveals the “home or hearth (*oikos*)” as a problematic basis of friendship (PF, 154; cf. Heidegger 1996, 105–109). The Platonic thinking of friendship ultimately confronts the finite ground of being with others, in which the human beings recurrently strive for the domesticity and close acquaintance with one’s own neighbors (cf. *Symposium* [Plato 1925], 205e).

Plato’s insight into the questionable relationship of friendship (*philia*) and familiarity (*oikeiotēs*) provokes Derrida’s own approach to the open possibility of friendship. Is there another basis of friendship to be disconnected from the natural affinity to one’s own? For Derrida, the radical questioning about the *other* mode of friendship without hearth can shake the traditional doctrine of friendship with domesticity and homogeneity (Ludwig 2010, 144). Ludwig maintains that although Derrida’s analyses of the *Lysis* display a certain ontological insight into the classical question of friendship, his limited perspective of otherness betrays “a tension with his desire for universal friendship” (Ludwig 2010, 145). But Derrida’s interpretive thinking seeks to uncover a questionable ground of the tension between the particularity and universality of being inherent in the nature of friendship. For Derrida, the other way of questioning is not to suggest a simply new way of searching for the so-called postmodern friendship beyond the classical question of friendship (cf. Dallmayr 1999, 121; Ludwig 2010, 146). Rather, he suggests that the permanent problem of friendship is already implied in the dramatic context of the *Lysis* that does not determine the meaning of friendship as such.

Here, Derrida pays attention to Socrates' subtle distinction between the belonging (*oikeion*) and the like (*homoion*) (222c). What belongs to a certain group of human beings makes them feel a certain sense of familiarity; however, our sense of belongingness does not necessarily signify the sameness or homogeneity of individual members (PF, 155). The belongingness cannot remove the difference or otherness of friendly individuals although they might be accustomed to a shared ground of political life. There *are* always certain beings whom we might call and name "friends" when we strive for a harmonious way of living with others. But we are not always sure of the truth of their being. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates declares an inevitable difficulty to grasp the essence of friendship: "Well, Lysis and Menexenus, we have made ourselves rather ridiculous today...[T]hough we conceive ourselves to be friends with each other...we have not as yet been able to discover what we mean by a friend" (*Lysis*, 223b). If we were not able to determine the true meaning of friendship, it would be also hard for us to believe in the true enemies of our own community.

VII. Conclusion

In these days, many political theorists argue for democratic innovations to overcome the contemporary crisis of democracy. They claim that the institutional reforms of civic participation and democratic deliberation are necessary to deal with the challenging problems of political polarization and populism (Kim and Seo 2021, 54–55). But successful democratic innovations require us to understand above all a deeper ground of the democratic crisis that has been

related to the far-right movements of populist democracy. Without tackling the nature of the right-wing extremism to exclude others from political community, it might be useless to make various efforts to reform democratic institutions with a more active mode of civic engagement. The far-right movement of populist parties can easily lead to a more severe polarization of democratic partisanship rather than to the increase of civic friendship within a political regime (cf. Jo 2024, 65–66).

Derrida's interpretive thinking of Plato reveals that the current democratic crisis, which tends to exclude others coming from different political communities, is not a momentary problem of contemporary global politics. Rather, the cause of this crisis is deeply inscribed in the nature of human existence which needs to maintain itself with a restricted sense of civic friendship in a particular political regime. Thus, Derrida's thoughts on the Platonic question of friendship allow us to approach the necessary boundary of democratic regime in a more careful and realistic sense: the democratic crisis of far-right movements cannot be simply removed by recurring enforcements of liberal policies or "democratic iterations" (cf. Benhabib 2004, 175; 178–180).

In this light, Derrida recognizes that Schmitt's understanding of the political discloses a necessary limitation of political community based on the friend/enemy grouping. The possible existence of a public enemy might effectively lead citizens of a political regime to unite and protect themselves from the constant threat of war and hostility. However, Derrida also sees Schmitt's illiberal perspective of the political existence contains significantly limited understanding of the nature of political existence: a political community cannot maintain itself without constantly searching for the genuine possibility of harmonious coexistence based on friendship. The political regime exists not only

for securing a people's survival from the war and factional conflicts but for constituting their best-possible mode of living with others. But it is always difficult to unite different individuals into a people sharing a democratic way of life peacefully. The Socratic irony of the *Menexenus* shows that the traditional belief in democracy tends to seek a mythical basis of the equal, friendly and harmonious citizenship; this mythological view of democracy often includes the natural brotherhood sharing aristocratic virtue of forefathers within a specific historical context. For Derrida, this confused doctrine of democratic membership tends to form an exclusive basis of the political regime without questioning the true meaning of friendship (PF, 106).

Plato's classical approach to the truth of being confronts a fundamental problem of friendship in terms of being in the *polis*. The political life of human beings must be grounded in a necessary boundary of their own community; they must face challenging questions of who the genuine friends are within and without the political regime. But the political decision of the "we" always involves a recurrent question about the true basis of friendship to be shared by fellow citizens (cf. Dallmayr 1999, 120–121; 126; Sokoloff, 2005, 350–351). Derrida sees that the irremovable difficulty of determining the genuine ground of friendship implies the recurring movement of *différance*, i.e. the differing and deferring modes of being with others; the possibility of *différance* is prior to "all organized *socius*, all *politeia*, all determined 'government' before all 'law'" (PF, 231). The primordial emergence of *différance* signifies not an arbitrary groundlessness of beings but a deeper ground of being that enables the legal decision of friendship or hostility possible (Derrida 2004, 73).

The political distinction between friend and enemy is originated from the possibility of differentiation based on otherness (Derrida 1984, 22). Therefore,

the existential basis of friendship cannot be simply created and maintained by the universal doctrines of democratic fraternity. In this sense, Derrida lets us see that the Socratic discussion of the Athenian regime and Greek friendship (*philia*) contains open possibilities of thinking about the recurrent problem of democracy. The satiric mood of the *Menexenus* reveals the critical limitation of the customary eulogy for political friendship based on the aristocratic origin of democratic fraternity and homogeneity. The *Lysis* further shows the fundamental difficulty of defining friendship as such. For Derrida, Plato's thinking of fraternity and friendship signifies not an old metaphysical view of political harmony but a persistent insight into the irremovable movement of otherness "*at the root of democracy*" (PF, 232). Indeed, the original thinking of Plato allows us to seriously confront the problematic ground of contemporary democracy that might reproduce the exclusive and chauvinistic conceptions of the political community in the name of civic brotherhood. Thereby, the classical approach to friendship still indicates a permanent question of political existence behind the populist movements that simply acclaim for a "democracy of our own" (Derrida 2005b, 87).

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우정, 우애 그리고 민주주의의 불편한 관계: 데리다의 『우정의 정치학』에 나타난 플라톤적 존재론의 정치적 문제들

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본 연구는 데리다의 『우정의 정치학』에 나타난 플라톤 대화록에 관한 해석을 중심으로 정치적 존재의 문제에 대해 다룬다. 본고는 데리다의 해석적 사유가 정치적 우정과 민주적 우애에 내재한 인간 공존의 고전적 문제를 드러내고 있다고 주장한다. 기존 연구들은 대부분 데리다의 차연(différance) 개념이 가지는 해체주의적 개념화에 초점을 두어, 그의 사유 방식에 내포한 존재에 관한 고전적 질문들과 정치적 접근법의 관계에 대해서는 상대적으로 조명을 하지 못한 경향이 있다. 이에 본고는 『우정의 정치학』에 대한 밀착 독해를 통해 데리다의 우정(friendship)과 우애(fraternity)에 관한 사유는 무엇보다 고대철학적 사유에 담긴 정치적 존재의 모호한 본성을 드러내고자 의도한 것임을 밝히고자 한다. 특히 그의 플라톤 대화록 해석은 민주적 공존의 문제적 기반을 규명하면서, 민주주의가 자연적 형제애를 증시하는 관습적 교리와 분리되기 어려움을 보여준다.